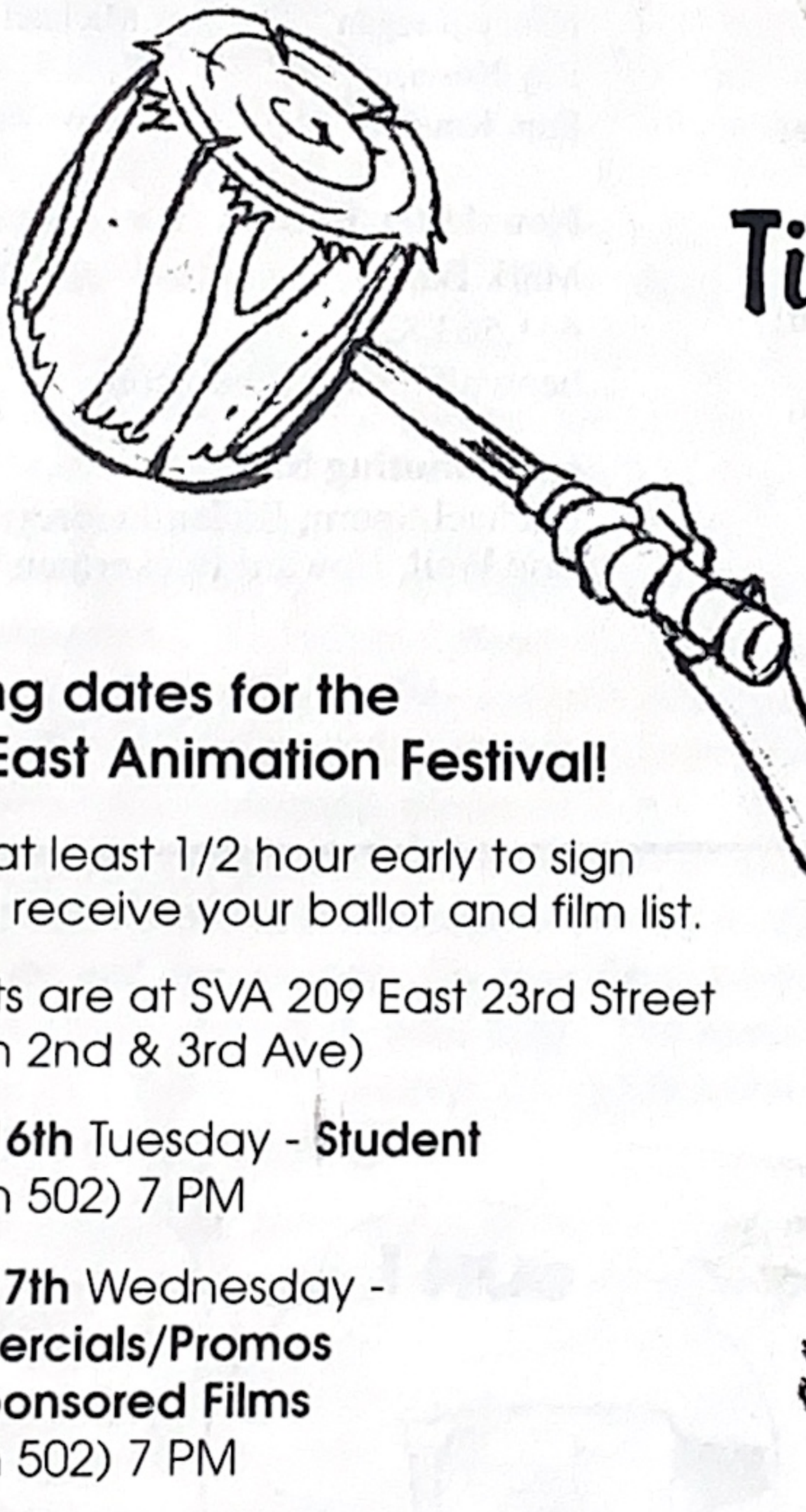
ASIFA EAST • The International Animated Film Society

# aNYmator

March 2004



## It's That Time Again!!

**Judging dates for the Asifa-East Animation Festival!**

*Arrive at least 1/2 hour early to sign in and receive your ballot and film list.

All nights are at SVA 209 East 23rd Street (btwn 2nd & 3rd Ave)

**March 16th** Tuesday - **Student** (room 502) 7 PM

**March 17th** Wednesday - **Commercials/Promos and Sponsored Films** (room 502) 7 PM

**March 23rd** Tuesday - **Independent** (3rd Floor Amphitheatre) 7:30 PM

Also Inside

- Howard Beckerman Happenings
- Why Michael Sporn Has To Try
- Richard Gorey Reviews "Gay Purr-ee"
- And Much More

## ASIFA East

**The International Animated Film Society Northeast /New York Chapter**

A Program of the New York Foundation For The Arts

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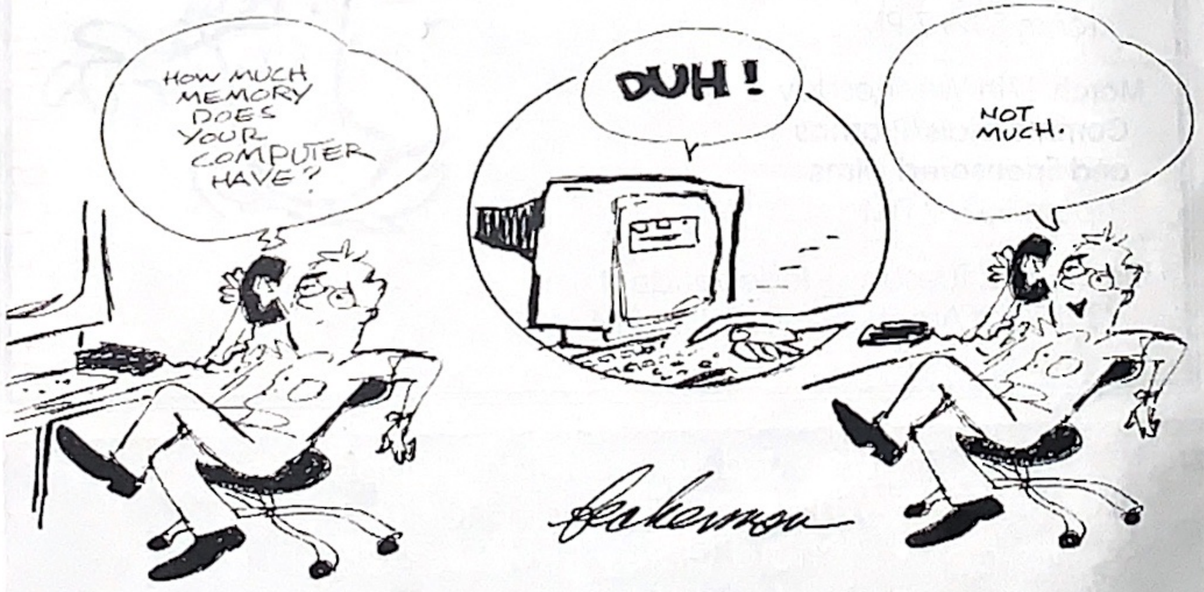
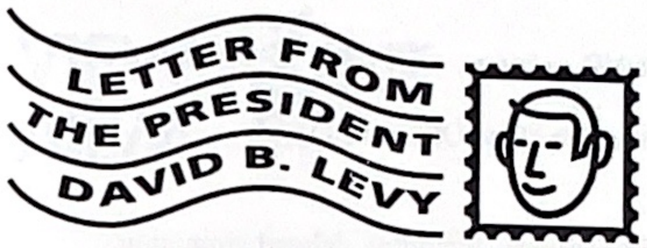



# Don't Avoid Eye Contact

On February 10th we held an Asifa-East event to promote and celebrate the release of Avoid Eye Contact: Best of NYC Independent Animation Vol.1 DVD. The eleven animators who pooled their money, fan-bases, and films together to create this self-distributed DVD have hit upon a unique new way to get their films to the public. At our event, the animators talked about the DVD as the perfect vehicle for such a diverse collection. The menus on DVDs make compilations like this easy to navigate. You can choose by the animator or by the film. The DVD format ensures that there are plenty of extras as well. Commentary tracks, art galleries, and making-of-documentaries are available for nearly all the films.

I thought that the biggest example of the enthusiasm of these animators is the fact that they seem to have rushed out this product without fully breaking down what each of them had at stake (financially). When asked how they will divide up any profits, they were innocently unprepared to answer. I'm sure they'll work it out. However, they were clearly united in their pride that Avoid Eye Contact represents the NY indie animation community. Pat Smith enthusiastically touted Avoid Eye Contact for placing veteran animators (Plympton, Griffin and Dilworth) along side relative new comers (himself, Fran Krause, Mike Overbeck and Jesse Schmal). While all the films made on this collection weren't necessarily produced in NY, (Krause, Overbeck and Schmall all made their films as students at RISD) it can still be said that this group has chosen NY as their home base. This DVD is meant to be a the first in a series of perhaps ten such releases. In the end, the veterans may have the last word over the newcomers. The veterans have a body of work decades long. The newcomers are much more likely to change names per release. However, the fact that this collection exists may encourage some to finish films of their own.

For those who missed the panel night, here were some highlights: Bill Plympton giving his advice to potential independent filmmakers: make them short, cheap and funny. PES's pitch perfect documentary of his excellent short, Roof Sex, which happens to be short, cheap and funny. Signe throwing out some alternate title choices for the DVD, including: ten guys and one chick, and animation jihad. Alex Budovsky drawing applause when he revealed that he works as an electrician. John Canemaker cheekily warning students not to listen when some on the panel giddily described how they didn't storyboard their films. Patrick Smith and John Schnall disagreeing over whether or not one should quit their day jobs to work on their own films full time. However, all agreed that working professionally made their independent work sharper.

There was the admission that the DVD could have had a far larger release (think Blockbuster Video) if they hadn't included films with such raunchy content. On the bright side, maybe this collection is still clean enough to play during the Super Bowl half-time show.

**Still don't own the DVD?**
**Check out these Avoid Eye Contact DVD extras:**

Bill Plympton's commentary track to "One Of Those Days", one of his earliest films.

Patrick Smith's pencils tests for Delivery, including deleted animation.

Jesse Schmal's gallery of unique design work.

John Dilworth's commentary track to "Dirdy Birdy" in which he reveals that he looked like John Turtoro back then.

John Schnall's spooky commentary to I was a Thanksgiving Turkey. Strictly dark meat.

PES's "Roof Sex" doc taking us behind the couch.

George Griffin's talking slide show on "A Little Routine" which shows his film to be the thinking man's version of kids versus adults (no offense, Tom Warburton).

Michael Overbeck's over the top doc on Tongues and Taxis. What's got into that cat?

Signe Baumane's illustration gallery. Equal parts dirty and lovely.

Is this not enough for you?
Tell me, what other such compilation features a Schmal and a Schnall?

**But Don't Avoid Buying The DVD!**

Go to *www.squarefootagefilms.com*
and get your copy today

Support your local animation industry because it may one day be supporting you

VIEW POINT AIEM

# I HAVE TO TRY

*by Michael Sporn*

Bear with me; this is an article about animation, but first I have something to observe.

This was the year of the documentary in movies.

CAPTURING THE FRIEDMANS is still in the news, questioning whether the film makers were biased and reshaped the complex and difficult information available. MY ARCHITECT completely dissects the world of an architect. It challenges the social values of an artist's life and gives us a clear view on architecture.

THE FOG OF WAR wholly reshapes the form, with one person on screen for the entire film, Robert McNamara. He analyzes his approach to Vietnam during the 60's and 70's and reports about the war and the mistakes that brought us to that war and kept us there. It reminds us vividly of the terrible mess in Iraq.

A documentary short has been heavily on my mind since last week's Academy screening. CHERNOBYL HEART is a hard-hitting analysis of the situation for children in the area of Chernobyl. We see the consequences of nuclear fallout after that reactor collapsed. The normalcy rate for children born today is 20%. (This, of course, means abnormal is the norm.) We see children disfigured, in pain, in operation, in jeopardy. We get to understand every possible aspect of this devastating situation. From the inexcusable lack of education and support offered by the government, to the total denial of the situation by the people in the area. Without manipulating the horrific images, the film presses forward just informing us, and informing us, and in so doing it warns us of other possibilities.

I left that screening unable to think about anything else. For days afterward, I was seriously affected. I am an animation film maker, so I kept relating it to the films I've made and am about to make. How to affect, inform, and engage audiences as intelligently as CHERNOBYL HEART; this is a question I keep re-running in my head.

I remember, many years ago, walking out of the premiere screening of Erroll Morris' first film, THE GATES OF HEAVEN. This was a film – in 1978 – which angered the audience at that first showing. The question and answer period with the director, afterward, was a hostile name-calling session of vitriol. I remember walking out of that audience stunned by the documentary I had just seen – it was more powerful in its originality back then. I stated to my companion at the time that I didn't think animation could ever do the same thing. Of course, I was immediately rebuked and was reminded of Yuri Norstein's film, TALE OF TALES.

I was wrong. Animation can do anything that live action can do. The only thing is that I have to remind myself every so often. Norstein's film is it for me. I have to remind myself of TALE OF TALES whenever I get into one of these depressions.

Lately with all the dross on the market, I have to remind myself often.

I have to get the next film I'm doing to be more dynamic, adult, informative. It has to be more like CHERNOBYL HEART. It has to be more like TALE OF TALES.

I have to make something great. I have to try.

# Dark Canvas:
# The Streets of Gay Purr-ee

*By Richard Gorey*

The UPA studios were, as many animators know, responsible for several innovations in animation during the fifties and sixties. Some of these- the bold and stylized "new wave" cartoon films- were welcomed with extravagant praise from nearly all quarters. Others- the economy measures which sometimes distinguished UPA's later product- have been seen as one of the defining characteristics of an industry in decline; a decline from which some would say it took animation nearly forty years to recover.

To be sure, the output of UPA was uneven, ranging from the dark brilliance of John Hubley's The Tell Tale Heart and Bobe Canon's Mr. Magoo to the mediocre offerings for television that somehow compromised the initial mission statement of the talented artists who'd once striven for something grand and groundbreaking.

The studio's first animated feature, "1001 Arabian Nights" was a vividly colorful, stylized retelling of the Aladdin myth, featuring Mr. Magoo. Pleasant, tuneful, and largely forgettable, the movie made little impression, and today has found an audience only among a devoted cult.

Even less well-known is the studio's second and final feature, the mystifying, haunting, and ultimately macabre cartoon "Gay Purr-ee", released in 1962. Recently, the movie has been released on DVD, in a beautifully restored print (which has, unfortunately, been cropped for a "wide-screen" look) and is now available for viewing by a public who may have missed the film upon its original release.

At first glance, the idea behind the movie seems sound: it's a cartoon about cats loose in Paris, with songs by Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg (of "Wizard of Oz" and "Brigadoon" fame) and voice performances by Robert Goulet, Red Buttons, Paul Frees, and most importantly- Judy Garland- in what was to become one of her final roles. For the prestigious UPA studios, this was a lot of star power, and it seemed to bode well for the film that it had been written by respected (and much honored) animator Chuck Jones, from an idea by Jones and his wife, Dorothy.

"Gay Purr-ee" started out with an enviable pedigree, but what made the film remarkable to artists and fans of animation was the conceit that the movie would be designed to reflect the sensibilities of the French impressionist movement that had flourished in Paris during the later years of the 18th century. Other films had, of course, borne the influence of such seminal painters as Gaugin, Picasso, and Renoir, but no previous feature film had been specifically designed to evoke the canvasses of these artists in both tone and style.

In retrospect, it seems clear that such a radical departure from established conventions may have proven such a formidable obstacle that other aspects of the film suffered, but what is more remarkable about the failure of "Gay Purr-ee" is the byproduct of that failure. That the film somehow stumbles as family entertainment is surpassed, in many ways, by its curiously adult tone, and in its dismissal of its seemingly intended audience (children) it aspires to be an "art film" in the truest sense of that word. In the end, "Gay Purr-ee" is a strangely joyless film, whose troubled, complex characters may only be of interest to those disconnected souls who have discovered themselves similarly trapped in a broadly etched nightmare of a world that has no place for them. If ever two artistic souls were destined to somehow and someday compliment each other, it would be Van Gogh and Garland, two geniuses whose talent alone was not enough to save them from their demons and ultimate depression.

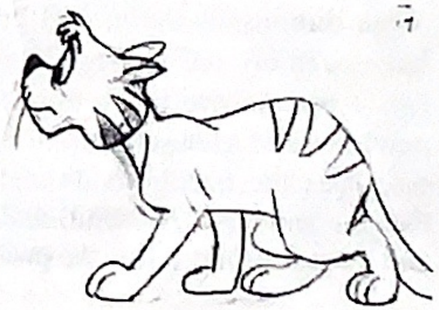
How did this series of widely-distanced events conspire to result in a film of such oppressive sadness, and bleak isolation? The film's tone may owe much to the choice of Judy Garland as the voice performance of the white cat, Mewsette, a farm-bred feline who longs for something more out of her life than the hayseed affections of her uncomplicated suitor, Jeune Tom (Goulet). Garland's presence on the film would undoubtedly have dictated several other decisions, all of which ultimately led to the shaping of a vision that may have been far removed from the original Dorothy and Chuck Jones concept. What was once an animated film for lovers of fine art became something of a vehicle for Garland- and the film slipped from being a benign family film to something uncannily echoing the sadness and illness of Van Gogh's world as seen through his paintings. Life imitates art…or maybe the other way.

Though life on the farm seems at first glance idyllic, through the familiar activities one would find in such an environment, the backgrounds tell another story. The opening pan across the sun baked fields reveals tortured sunflowers in the style of Van Gogh, and a landscape populated with twisted trees and sinister shadows. Beneath the farm's sunny charm, there is an underlying note of disquiet and even claustrophobia. Mewsette's only escape from the distorted, painfully crowded world around her is an escape she imagines through the musings of a visiting Coquette- a jaded city woman (whom we assume to be of easy virtue) who flashes "The brilliant blue diamonds" of Paris before Mewsette's dazzled eyes.

I think the filmmakers meant to imply this distortion. By employing Van Gogh's uneasy palettes and violent compositional idioms, they have rendered a vision of the French countryside that is at the same time colorful and ominous. That the film reflects Van Gogh's obsessions and insecurities with such disturbing fidelity is one of its great strengths. But this very strength fouls the film as an amiable cartoon for family viewing. It's almost as if that same note of wild despair that characterized both Garland and Van Gogh is vibrating just below the movie's glossy surface. Above anything else, the movie is about loneliness, not belonging, and the impulse towards self-destruction such emotional states create. Even when the film evokes art of Van Gogh's less tortured periods (as in the opening pan across the farm, which references his famous view of the Langlois Bridge at Arles) it is calling to mind the style and the perspective of an artist who, like the similarly brilliant Galrand, took his own life.

Garland's involvement in the project, though an undeniable coup in and of itself, probably dictated the character and content of the score. It was Garland who convinced composers Harburg and Arlen to lend their singular talents to the enterprise. But was this done for the good of the film, or as a favor to Garland, to feature her voice in a series of ballads more suited to her concert audiences than to the children who saw the finished film?

In fact, the score is one of the movie's most puzzling elements; at times delightful and quite affecting, it is at others startlingly vulgar- infinitely more suited to a cabaret act than to a cartoon movie that purports to be a romp through the streets of the "city of lights".



It's established early on that Mewsette is something of a bumpkin; a naïve and uncultured house cat whose experiences of life are very limited. When the courtesan visiting her owner talks teasingly about the Champs Elyssee, Mewsette thinks "I wonder what those taste like?" A moment later, her character sings about her desire for a more exciting life, and the song, "Take My Hand, Paree" is filled with knowing nods to Paris culture, nightlife, and geography. Is this a hint that Mewsette is ready to expand her consciousness? Or is it merely poor character development? The song seems much better suited to the character of the grotesque Madame Reubens Chatte, voiced fittingly by Hermoine Gingold, than to the naive Mewsette. Such throaty ballads were ideally penned for Garland's deep, resonant singing voice, but their inclusion in the film at such an early juncture is jarring and false. One has the feeling - once the songs had been written, and met with Garland's approval- that there was no suggestion or inclination to change them, or to alter their lyrics to suit the finished film. It seems a case of true star power getting quite in the way of a cohesive final product.

Mewsette runs off to experience the glamour, excitement, and thrills of life in Paris, but right from the start, she is made a victim of the downside of this girlish dream. Before the train even arrives at the station, Mewsette is accosted by the wily seducer Meowrice, voiced by Paul Frees. He is, along with the sardonically jaded Madame Reubens Chatte, the film's most vivid and unforgettable character. He is also, by any yardstick, a pimp, and his visit to his "sister's" shop (clearly a whorehouse) cannot be misinterpreted, even by the most forgiving viewers. Our first view of the Madame, lounging in a classical pose on a series of silk pillows, tossing catnip into her mouth, leaves no doubt as to her chosen vocation. Even the beauty mark on her cheek is a detail designed to define the character in the most telling terms. That Madame Reubens Chatte is supposed to "make Mewsette into one of the most desirable cats in all Paris" further defines the wicked feline's role. If there is any doubt as to Meowrice's intentions, in a following scene, he is surreptitiously writing to a buyer to whom he has promised to deliver Mewsette, once she has been groomed for "mariage".

Meowrice's character design and sterling voice performance make him one of cartoondom's most memorable villains. His henchmen, black voids on the screen, except for their yellow eyes, are triumphs of color and design. (Black is striking against any color: it represents a "hole" in the screen.) Meowrice's highly-stylized song and dance number "The Money Cat" performed on the rooftops of Paris in front of a blood red moon, calls to mind several other movie musical moments. It's the black-sheep cousin of such scenes in "Mary Poppins" and "West Side Story". Though Meowrice is sometimes very funny, he takes an almost sadistic delight in causing trouble and pain. Not only does he think nothing of selling Mewsette into sexual slavery (and to an Ugly America, no less) but his first glimpse of Jeune Tom on the dark street evokes nothing more than a pondering on the value of ship cats. Meowrice is a totally irredeemable scoundrel, and his moments of cowardice do not for a second diminish his true evil.

What diminishes the movie, however, is its reliance on artistic "in jokes" that seem to have been created for students of painting and the French Impressionists. At one point, Meowrice informs his American buyer that there has been a series of portraits done of the newly-coifed Mewsette. Here the film stops dead for a full five minutes while Meowrice discusses the backgrounds and sensibilities of each artist, including Picasso, Gaugin, Renoir, Van Gogh, Serraut, and others. As a short film, this might have been instructive and even charming. But the problem is that this information has already been introduced- in the film's many and varied backgrounds, which pay tribute to the same artists' work in previous scenes. It's as if the filmmakers didn't trust their audience to "get it" and inserted this scene to make sure they'd made their point. Of course,if you have to explain the joke, you've already failed in the telling.

If only this were the only such misstep in the movie, but it appears as if the UPA house style for introducing musical numbers was to abruptly shift gears, stop using full animation, and treat the audience to three minutes of pans across stylized backgrounds. Often these interludes have very little to do with the story's action or themes, visually, and what remains are some very pretty picture whose context is questionable at best and mystifying at worst. Very few of the movie's songs are outstanding- a few are dull time- wasters, and at least one "Roses Red, Violets Blue" is a clunker.

Garland, however, was said to be especially fond of the lovely "Little Drops of Rain" number which Jeune Tom imagines Mewsette singing while shanghaied on a ship bound for Alaska. It was said that Garland was looking for a new theme song to replace the timeworn (but immortal) "Over the Rainbow", and, for a time, she considered adopting "Little Drops of Rain" (by Rainbow composer Arlen) as her signature closing number. Fans, of course, demanded otherwise, but "Little Drops of Rain" may be the song "Gay Purr-ee" is remembered by, if indeed it is remembered at all.

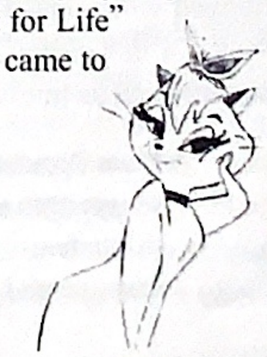
Critics at the time were unkind, and seemed perplexed by the film's macabre emotional cynicism. Newsweek magazine remarked, "There seems to be an effort to reach a hitherto undiscovered audience; the fey four-year-old of recherché taste."

Though the proceedings are somewhat morose throughout the movie, nowhere does the tone become more bleak than in the sequence in which Mewsette temporarily escapes from the clutches of Meowrice and his minions. Here the backgrounds reference Picasso's "blue" period, as well as the later, tortured canvasses of Van Gogh (specifically "View of Paris from Vincent's Room- 1887). Here again, we hear a song that might have been perfectly apropos, had Garland voiced the sorry, dissipated Madame Reubens Chatte, but hearing Mewsette wail, from the railing of a bridge over the canal "River, river/ won't you be my lover?/ Don't let me down", is surreal, not only because it speaks so baldly to the thought of suicide, but because in retrospect, Garland's own suicide makes the sentiment feel terribly prophetic.

And yet, in what other animated film are you likely to encounter such oddly-mature moments of desperation and tragedy? Oh, sure, there are plenty of sad and frightening things that happen in the Disney films, like the death of Bambi's mother, and the chase by Monstro the whale, but there's something about the hopelessness- both visual and emotional- in "Gay Pur-ee" that sets this film well apart from other animated classics.

That it ultimately fails as "fun for the whole family" is secondary to the movie's success as an art film- a cartoon movie that uncannily captures the sense of dizzying despair found in the later canvasses of Vincent Van Gogh. In the end, "Lust for Life" notwithstanding, "Gay Purr-ee" may be the closest the movies ever came to conveying the quality of bleak solitude that, for so many millions, characterizes Van Gogh's most indelible works.

"Gay" indeed.



# Flying High or "Falling with Style"?

## For Pixar, Exciting Prospects And Daunting Challenges Await Life After Disney

*By Eric Weil*

There's a wonderful moment during the climax of Toy Story when the toys Woody and Buzz Lightyear face losing their owner forever. Their response, while purposeful, is also reckless and a great laugh arises from watching the toys realize their danger only after lighting the fateful match. "Wait a minute," Woody muses as the fuse strapped to Buzz catches fire, "I just lit a rocket. Rockets explode!"

Woody and Buzz survived their brush with ballistic weapons quite nicely, but when Toy Story creator Pixar Animation Studios recently ended negotiations to extend its lucrative partnership with the Walt Disney Company, I wondered whether the computer animation pioneer hadn't ignited its own precarious fix. While Pixar's aim was clear-- starting in 2006, the studio wants to fund and own its new films outright, thus reaping box office and ancillary (e.g. merchandising) spoils enjoyed only by fellow visionary George Lucas--its means initially seemed dramatic, even foolhardy, for a company that prospered as Pixar has while with Disney.The move also upended the popular consensus that despite reports of contentious negotiations, Disney and Pixar would ultimately find too much value working together to separate. Now, with Disney retaining the rights to exploit all characters and content from Pixar's first seven features--i.e. Pixar's library to date, plus the forthcoming The Incredibles and Cars-- and the option to produce sequels to any film that Pixar declined to produce itself, some industry pundits, stockholders and animation fans were fretting for Pixar's long-term future and legacy.

In recent weeks, Pixar has mounted a thorough and, to my mind, largely successful effort to justify its decision to the public. In particular, Pixar devoted a major portion of an early February conference call to investors, nominally intended to announce the company's record earnings for 2003, to addressing concerns over its potentially permanent split with Disney. Pixar Chief Executive Officer Steve Jobs and Chief Financial Officer Ann Mather even attempted to head off their stakeholders' most fundamental queries by running through a prepared interlude during which Mather fed Jobs canned questions and Jobs obliged with canned responses. For all its contrivances, this 'preemptive interview' presented a thoughtful and fairly comprehensive rationale for exploring life after Disney, summarized as follows:

- Pixar decided to end its exclusive negotiations with Disney only after 10 months of trying to strike a deal. The company appreciates the historic success it enjoyed in tandem with Disney but ultimately Disney did not adequately value Pixar's creative and financial contributions to Disney's bottom line.

- Looking ahead, Pixar will play a more active role in merchandising its post-Disney films. Jobs doesn't think that staffing up and otherwise adjusting to this new responsibility will be too difficult.

- Pixar should have no problem finding a deal as attractive as the one offered by Disney. Jobs contends that Pixar "did (its) homework" prior to entering exclusive negotiations with Disney and essentially knew what Disney's rivals would offer. In fact, Jobs claims to have offered Disney a deal less favorable than what was attainable elsewhere-- namely a higher distribution royalty to Disney, a longer-term commitment and free use of future Pixar characters-- on the condition that "The Incredibles" and "Cars" be folded into the terms of this new agreement.

- The loss of Disney as a creative partner will be negligible as it has been "years" since the companies collaborated creatively on Pixar's films.

- While Disney does offer formidable marketing resources, distribution as well as the power of Disney's brand, the success of such recent films as Ice Age (Fox) Spider Man (Sony), the Lord of the Rings Trilogy (New Line) and the Harry Potter movies (Warner Brothers) suggests that strong marketing and distribution is available elsewhere. As for Disney's brand, no amount of clever branding--or smart marketing and distribution strategies, for that matter-- will turn a dud into a hit, as evidenced by the flagging fortunes of Disney's own animated films.

- Pixar is simply not as interested in sequels as Disney, other studios and entertainment investors tend to be. To date, the studio has declined to make "Toy Story 3," freeing Disney to make it alone and claim most of the revenues. While Pixar has not decided whether to make sequels to its other films, the studio is currently inclined to focus on developing original stories and characters. The box office performances of "Monsters Inc." and "Finding Nemo" demonstrated that entirely new ventures can be more successful than even "Toy Story 2," the highest-grossing animated sequel of all time. Jobs says that studio brass are "sick" about the prospect of Disney making sequels to Pixar films alone, citing the aesthetically uninspiring results of recent Disney theatrical and direct-to-video sequels featuring its classic animation characters. That said, Pixar is uninterested in intentionally making inferior products and does not want to bog down its creative team in sequel obligations when exiting new challenges and richer rewards await elsewhere.

It's hard to begrudge Pixar's desire to avoid committing-- and partly confining-- itself to reviving existing characters and continuing highly popular franchises. Granted, most companies would kill to be so imprisoned by their successes, but doing justice to beloved predecessors is hard work, assuming you don't follow Disney's sequel strategy of reheating ageless classics like yesterday's leftovers. Keeping an old flame burning can be a worthy challenge, but sometimes innovative companies get restless; witness the Jim Henson Company's recent sale of its Muppet franchise to Disney. Perhaps the Henson heirs didn't have the passion to keep doting on Kermit and Miss Piggy. Perhaps they wanted to emerge from the shadow of their father's genius (this would be incongruous for an entity named

'The Jim Henson Company,' but feasible nonetheless) . Perhaps they are surrendering after a fourteen year struggle to return the Muppets to the prominence the characters enjoyed during Jim Henson's lifetime. Whatever the case, the Hensons are now freer to define their own legacy on their terms.

Pixar seems willing to gamble that their future achievements will more than offset any disservice done by Disney to the studio's early work. Besides, most of those initial efforts feature casting that may complicate Disney's ability to create viable sequels. Pixar has frequently used top celebrity talent to fill their leading roles--internationally recognizable names like Tom Hanks, Billy Crystal, John Goodman, Tim Allen and, to a lesser extent (for now), Finding Nemo's Albert Brooks and Ellen DeGeneres. The healthy careers--and presumably, the personal fortunes-- of these and other Pixar performers permit them the luxury of passing on any subpar sequel scripts. By contrast, Disney characters like Peter Pan, Cinderella, The Little Mermaid and all of those 101 Dalmatians don't have celebrities associated with their roles, and are therefore easier to cast. Would Disney dare replace Tom Hanks with a B- or C- lister should Hanks decline a return engagement as Woody? Possibly, but not without damaging the new project's cachet, profit potential, and arguably, part of its raison d'etre.

Jobs' argument that strong marketing exists at other studios is also convincing, with one exception. Beyond its success with Harry Potter-- hardly a surprising feat given the international strength of the Harry book brand-- Warner Brothers has relatively few family movie successes and many notable disappointments, particularly animated efforts like Looney Tunes: Back in Action and Pixar Director Brad Bird's acclaimed drawn feature The Iron Giant. Jobs may counter that Warners' undistinguished recent track record in animation hardly matters to Pixar, as Pixar's films are marketed not as animated movies but as event movies. However, Jobs' claim that marketing can't redeem a lousy film is dead wrong and a little mystifying. The star 'sell' is a time-tested approach that has sometimes redeemed a fundamentally flawed picture-- take much of the oeuvre of Robin Williams (please). Jobs would be more accurate to note that subpar animated films usually can't be saved by a star sell (witness last summer's flop Sinbad, voiced by Brad Pitt, Michele Pfeiffer and Catherine Zeta-Jones) or that critically derided movies that become hits, or even blockbusters, rarely perform as well as Pixar movies and don't linger as long in the popular imagination.

Let's give Jobs the benefit of the doubt in assuming that Pixar, whose previous experience in consumer products is basically limited to selling its RenderMan software, will easily adjust to the staffing and administrative needs of controlling its future film merchandising. Surely Jobs' colleagues at his other company, Apple Computer, can be helpful consultants on this matter. Ultimately, the company's biggest challenge moving forward is maintaining its core mission-- to tell great stories, with its technical wizardry serving the narrative rather than the reverse-- in an environment rife with increased distractions, namely greater wealth, greater hype, growing competition, increased scrutiny by the media and investors and its own imposing track record.

The bidding now underway to distribute Pixar's films is in many ways a coming out party for the company, the culmination of its ascendance from innovative up-and-comer to industry behemoth. This moment has been made possible largely by Pixar's achievements but also by Jobs' masterful portrayal of this crossroads as a conquering moment rather than a time of uncertainty. Sometimes both efforts converge, as when Jobs announced during the recent conference call that Disney's own research indicated that beginning with Monsters, Inc., moviegoers considered the Pixar name a bigger draw than Disney's fabled brand.

If Pixar has become the most powerful and trusted brand in animation, I hope they never treat this distinction as justification for complacency. Pixar's intended evolution into a merchandiser also means that the studio by definition no longer exists solely to tell great stories. Surely Roy E. Disney's recent public accusation that his uncle Walt's company has become "soulless" and "rapacious" provides a cautionary tale to Pixar about the potential for commerce to overwhelm a company's art. Furthermore, here's a friendly reminder for Jobs (who no doubt must love receiving advice from someone who earns less in one year than what he likely earns in a day): Pixar's competitive position is very different than Apple's. While Apple needs all the hype it can muster to remain a viable niche player in a Wintel world, Pixar is now the dominant player in its field. The company can afford to let its product speak for itself, precisely what it did to attain its current success.

So Pixar's surest route to continued ascendancy post-Disney, or at least ensuring its survival, is to follow the example of many Disney film heroes and be true to itself (although in recent Disney lore, it hasn't hurt to be extremely good looking, royalty, or both). And since Pixar is now animation royalty, its ability to handle the trappings of its prosperity while staying on mission will determine whether the company's fortunes will soar, or, in the tradition of Buzz Lightyear, fall in grand style.

*Eric Weil is an animation producer and writer from New York City. Current projects include a series of shorts for Sesame Workshop and a movie treatment for Blue Sky Studios/20th Century Fox Animation. He can be reached at eweil@mindspring.com*

# Howard Beckerman Happenings

On March 23 and April 14, animation legend Howard Beckerman will share fascinating insights from his life-time as animator and director of such beloved classics as Mighty Mouse, Heckle & Jeckle, Popeye, and Winky Dink, during two fun-packed interview sessions with animation artists Martin Abrahams and Allan Neuwirth.

The events mark the release of Beckerman's book "Animation: The Whole Story" (Allworth Press), a comprehensive guide to the art, history, and business of animation and "an instant classic, a necessity for both fans and creators of cartoons, and nearly everyone in between." (Indiewire.com)

Animation fans and artists of all levels, don't miss this opportunity to meet one of New York's most cherished and inspiring pioneers of animation.

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**Tuesday, March 23, 7PM**
Interview & Live Sketching Session with HOWARD BECKERMAN
Interviewer: Martin Abraham, artist and animator

LOCATION:
Barnes & Noble in Chelsea
675 6th Avenue & 22nd Street
Phone 212.727.1675

**FREE**

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**Wednesday, April 14, 6:30PM**
Interview & Film Screening with HOWARD BECKERMAN
Interviewer: Allan Neuwirth, animation artist

LOCATION:
The School of Visual Arts
3rd Floor Amphitheatre
209 E. 23 Street

**FREE**

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## ABOUT HOWARD BECKERMAN

Howard Beckerman has worked for major animation studios yet spent most of his career in New York City, where animated filmmaking originated and where he and his wife Iris ran their own studio, Howard Beckerman Animation, for twenty years. He is has taught for over thirty years at Parson's School of Design and the Department of Film and Animation at the School of Visual Arts.

## ABOUT MARTIN ABRAHAM

Martin Abraham is an artist, animator, and video producer who has produced animated films for Sesame Street and Make a Wish. He also teaches animation at the School of Visual Arts.

## ABOUT ALLAN NEUWIRTH

Allan Neuwirth is an award-winning writer, producer, and director of animated TV series and commercials and the author of "Makin' Toons" and of "Chelsea Boys".


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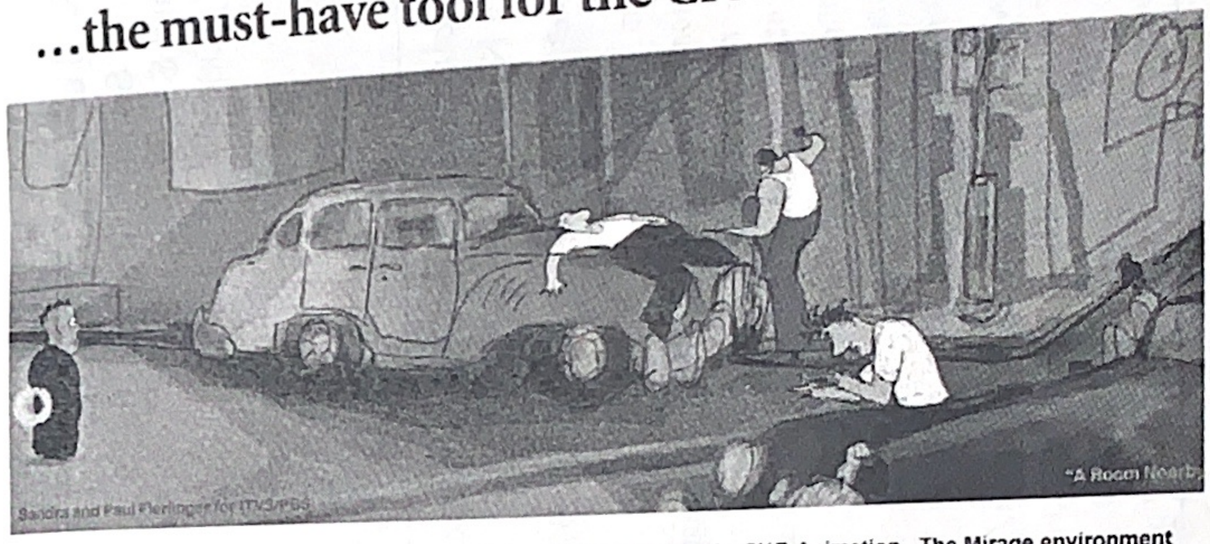

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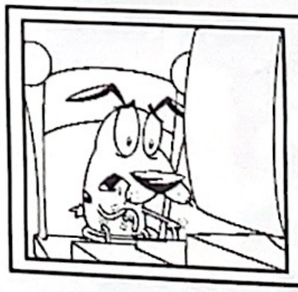

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